

Museums & Culture

Time Out Chicago / Issue 166 : May 1–7, 2008

One-man band

In a Berwyn garage, Mike Garay reconstructs his childhood, piece by animatronic piece.

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Photograph by Jeremy Bolen



If there's an award for Awesomest Garage on Earth, 31-year-old Michael Garay is a shoo-in. Step into the radio producer's Berwyn garage and instead of the usual collection of household tools and oddball furniture, you'll find a four-foot-tall robot cheerleader with a head full of exposed wires standing near a guitar-wielding android bear without a face. Faces, Garay explains, are fragile and expensive. They go on last.

Garay is one of a handful of fans dedicated to giving the Rock-afire Explosion—an eight-piece robotic animal band that was once the main attraction at the 1980s restaurant chain Showbiz Pizza Place (now Chuck E. Cheese)—its ultimate comeback. Amassing, assembling and reprogramming members of the band in basements and garages across the country, fans like Garay say that you might not be able to relive your childhood, but you can try to rebuild it.

"As a kid, I just idolized this stuff," Garay admits. "I fell in love with the lighting and the animation and the scenery.... When a [Rock-afire Explosion] character first became available to me, I thought it'd be cool. I could put it up in my house, listen to some shows, buy back my youth."

Since first purchasing Rolfe deWolfe, a ventriloquist wolf robot who provided comic relief by speaking through a bird puppet named Earl Schmerle, in 1998, Garay's collection has turned from hobby into full-on obsession. Ten years later, Garay owns approximately 20 android accompanists, all in different stages of completion, and estimates he's sunk $25,000 into what was supposed to be a one-time purchase. Tack on the three to four annual cross-country trips to build and repair tuxedo-clad gorilla keyboardists and space suit–wearing drummer dogs in other fans' homes, as well as the costs of attending the annual Rock-afire collectors' convention (yep, there's a convention), and the tab for keeping the mechanized musicians up and running easily rivals the cost of running a real band.

"It takes a lot of time and a lot of money, but you beg, you borrow, you go Dumpster diving, you trade stuff," Garay explains. "It's a thrill, not only being here with my stuff when people come in and look around, but going to the other sites and seeing people my age who have the same thoughts and the same feelings. That's so cool."

Garay admits that along with the thrill of connecting with the like-minded comes strange looks from noncollectors who simply don't understand why a grown man would want ten pairs of animatronic eyes staring him down every time he steps into his garage. "I know it's kind of weird to be a 22-year-old kid with a robot who would rather spend a Saturday night rewiring stuff than going out," he explains. "As I'm getting older, it's probably more weird, but I have no problem with that. It's something that makes me me. Besides, if you had a chance to have a giant robot band, wouldn't you?"

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(Time Out Chicago - May 2008)

Date of Origin: 2008
Archived: 5-24-08
Submission by Menutia
Version 1.0

